



POLITY AND SOCIETY IN MEDIEVAL ASSAM: A REVIEW ON KACHARI STATE

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ABSTRACT

Assam is the easternmost outpost of Indian civilization from the remote past when the people belonging to different races and ethnic groups settled, and a composite culture was grown out of their living in close proximity for millennia. In the first part of the topic, Assam is meeting ground of divers ethnic and cultural streams as well as the principal migrants have been the Austro-Asiatic, the Dravidians, the Tibeto-Burman, the Mongoloid and Aryan. In second, the Assamese people along with the Kachari may rightly be placed under two broad groups the Tribals and the Non-Tribals. Socially and culturally the tribal people of Assam have contributed immensely towards the formation of the rich socio-cultural fabric known as 'Assamese'. In third, the historical understanding with the process of interaction between the Aryans and the non-Aryans and between the Tribal and the non-Tribal is being carried on in Assamese society even to this day. It is also explored in forth part in the topic that some factors witnessing to develop feudal state formation. Lastly, it will give the birth to a kind of paternal bureaucracy as a measure of reconciling the internal contradictions within the ruling class along with a coercive authority and it manifested the ruling class interest vis-à-vis state. And some new findings and conclusions are to be drawn at the end.

INTRODUCTION:

The Kachari are a Bodo tribe of Mongoloid stock. They are aboriginal people of the Brahmaputra valley. They were a ruling tribe exercising sovereign power in Upper Assam from the west of the Dikhow river to the Kapili valley in Nagaon till they were compelled to retreat to the Barak valley by the Ahoms in the 17th century. When the Aryans ultimately defeated the Bodos (Kiratas), a leading section of them left their country and took to wandering life, in course of which, they got scattered into different groups all over North-east. The rest, who submitted to the invaders, became Hinduised or semi-Hinduised and had racial admixture with others. In course of time, these scattered groups of the Bodos came to be known under different local names and branches under different chiefs in the south bank of the Brahmaputra from Dibru to Kallang, the Dhansiri valley and North Cachar Hills with Dimapur as result of the process of Sanskritization. The Kachari were not known by their respective present names. The people from the eastern sub-Himalayan regions came to northeast India not in one migration but in successive times and one such migration brought the Kachari. The original homeland of the Kachari also was Tibet and China and other wave came from the north. They entered western Assam through the valley of Teesta, Sonkosh and founded their kingdom in that area. Another migration was from the northeast and they made their way through the Subansiri, Dibang and Dihing valley in Assam.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

1. To study the ethnic compositions of the land in the period of our study.
2. To investigate the factors responsible for the formation of the Kachari states
3. To observe the basic structure, changing pattern and process of the formation of society
4. To make a critical assessment of the polity and administration, economy, religion of Kachari

HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING:

Before the state formation of the Kacharis, the village community was an independent and self-contained unit of society. Social stratification appeared and gradually distance between the higher and lower classes began to increase among the Kacharies. Tradition indicates that the Kachari entered into clashes with the neighbouring powers. The Mikirs are said to be invaded and expelled by the Kachari from their original abode, lying between the Dhansiri, the Jammuna and the Kapili rivers. The Sri Rajmala contains an account of a confederacy of the tribal chiefs against an alliance, made between the Tripuri king and the king of Hedambs (i.e. the Kachari king) etc. The Dimasa-Kachari kingdom of Cachar was regarded by the scattered Bodos of the region as the 'lingering symbol of their royal unity and hence they maintained some sort of loyalty to its rulers, paying tributes to them from whenever they lived'. Therefore the Parbatias who are preserving their own culture intact, may be considered as the representatives of the original Kachari race.

Although those who lived in the plains did not preserve their original customs and institutions for longtime, their counterparts living in the hills succeeded in maintaining their complete isolation from the absorbing power of Hinduism. Under such circumstances having migrated from place to place to preserve their own culture and identity from being lost in the Aryan influence, the surviving

members of the ruling family of the Bodos (Kiratas) with their loyal followers, at last established themselves at Sadiya and a place called Hedamba, on the south bank of the Brahmaputra, who were subsequently known at 'Sadiyal and Hedambiyal' Kachari respectively. The Kachari kings were also patrons of literature and their royal court were adorned by a galaxy of Brahmins translated some of the Puranas and the Hindu epics. Hedembeswar Narapati commissioned his court scholar Dvijabar to compose a poetic treatise. The Assamese literature began from the king Durlavnarayana in Kamata. The king Mahamanikya of Borahi commissioned Madhab Kandali to translate the Ramayana into Assamese. There is some unique quality in every society by which it could be distinguished from the others. Such uniqueness of the Kachari society from the 13th to the beginning of the 16th century is the descent system by which it can be singled out in the areas like the Brahmaputra, Dhansiri, Kapili valley and partly up to Dikhau river in the east. Moreover, the great division of the Indo-Chinese family of people included the Dimasa or the Hill Kachari, the Bodo or the plains Kachari, the Rabha, the Garo, the Lalung and the like.

The Dimasas present a case of double descent systems which were prevalent in the both patrilineal and the matrilineal system. They primarily go by sex, i.e. a man primarily reckons descent from his paternal grandfather and concurrently from maternal grand-mother. They developed their tribal influence when the advanced type of agriculture came. They were divided into several bands in the Brahmaputra Valley. These band societies were splintered in the reverent areas where they developed their new methods of agriculture. In course of time, these scattered groups of the Bodos came to be known under different local names and branches under different chiefs. The ethnographic evidences may help in reconstructing the stage of their society, especially those relating to technology, economy, material culture and settlement pattern. This approach has been most successfully applied in the neolithic sites such as Daojilohading in the North Cachar Hills of Assam, Sarutaru in Kamrupa and Biswanath Chariyal in the Sunitpur district. Although those who lived in the plains had not preserved for longer period of their original customs and institutions, their counterparts living in the hills succeeded in maintaining their complete isolation from the absorbing power of Hinduism.

Subsequently, with the formal conversion of the ruling class to Hinduism, stories were composed to ascribe them Hindu origin from legendary figures and a long list of the names of their kings descending from Bhima (Second Pandava) to Gobindra Chandra was prepared. Their male and female forms of divinity were also tactfully included into the class of Hindu pantheon under royal patronage. The animistic type of religion of the Kachari also gradually borrowed a few features from the pantheon. But the great majority of the subject population, particularly those who remained in hill region and lived in interior villages, took conservative attitude and retained to a large extent their pristine religious rites and beliefs, manners and customs and language. Hence, they remained untouched by the changing circumstances. Materials regarding the social life of the Kachari for the period under study are very scanty. But as the Dimasas, specially of North Cachar i.e. Dan or Parbatials, have a distinctive tribal manner and customs including social rites. It is certain that originally family, in case of other community, based on the social organization of the Kachari. They had developed patriarchal set up but remnants of matriarchal can still be traced among them which is indicated by the present position of woman in their family, existence of formal clans almost parallel to male clans, customs of paying bride price to bride's father

and the bridegrooms serving in the bride's house after the marriage etc. The inter-relationship among the members in a Kachari family was of particular nature where they gave more emphasis on conjugal life than conjugal tie. Unlike the Bodo-Kachari, the married Dimasa sons were not permitted to live with his parent's family unit.

In the society of Dimasa-Kachari, the properties like weapons, money, land, cattle etc. belonging to the father passed on to his son by inheritance and the properties like loom, woman's garments, ornaments etc. belonging to mother passed on to her daughter by inheritance. Utensils were a common property. If there were no children to the parents; the father's properties passed on to the closest members of paternal relations and the mother's properties passed on to the members of maternal relation. These traits may be traces or influences of some older matrilineal system. The status of male and female in the Dimasa-Kachari's community or society were not equal. For similar kind of offence, the punishment or treatment was different for both e.g. the order to pay punishable amount was only half of it for man and it was required to pay full amount for woman. The Kachari are found to be divided themselves into some exogamous clans which must have been introduced in their society from the beginning. Otherwise its practice would not have been so rigid among them at later stage. Moreover, a clanless tribal society also cannot be thought of, because of the fact that the exogamous classes were the main essence of a tribe and exogamy was one of the main obligations. They believed in both matrilineal and patrilineal system of descent. Certain marriage customs seem to be peculiar to tribal society in Assam.

There is a custom in which a man called a *dhoka* or *chapaniya* goes to live with a widow as her husband. Moreover, a widower sometimes brings into his house a widow as his wife, which is known as *batalu*. The *dhoka* leaves his original home for good, discarding all rights to property. Leaving aside the *dhoka* system, the Bodos generally provide a good safeguard to their widows. The socially accepted form of a Bodo marriage is more or less the same in all villagers, though certain rites vary from clan to clan. The Kachari are clannish and clan tie among them was very strong. The existence of the parallel male and female clans which is the most outstanding feature of the social life has made their law of inheritance unique in the family -history of the tribes of the North-East India. The Kachari society emphasizes on gender equality in the family. Therefore, in the absence of the husband, the wife could act as head of the family. But traditionally woman had no political right at all. They were not permitted to be members of the village council or the village headman, priest or diviner. Speaking about the marriage ceremony of the Kacharis, Robinson writes that a large party used to assemble in this occasion. He describes the ceremonies thus -Some dance, whilst others play on certain musical instruments, and all contribute to their mutual conviviality. The whole company bears witness to the mutual consent of the happy couple of their union.'

FINDINGS OF THE TOPIC:

1. Kachari were divided into *sengphongs* or clans; their rights and duties in state affairs were also found to be distributed. The *sengphongs* enjoyed full authority in local affairs. Each *Sengphong* or clan or division of the Dimasa tribe sent a representative to the *Raj Darbar* (Royal court) with the ministers to help the king in his administration.
2. Mel was a powerful organization in the Kachari state politics with the authority even to elect the Raja. Each representative was given seat in *Mel Mandop* according to the status.
3. The Dimasa-Kachari commenced with the growth of villages consisting of the number of families belonging to different clans. Later on, another parallel assembly known as *Ul* was constituted with the representatives of the *khel* formed by the subjects
4. The special Darbar of elderly Kachari people and leaders at the capital (Khaspur). They also held Darbar to their vassal chiefs, where in the latter look their seats by the side of round triumphal pillars assigned to each as mark of submission.
5. Aluraja the highest priest was the spirited adviser to the king. After conversion to Hinduism, the Kachari Raj Darbar was adorned by a galaxy of Brahmans whose advice was always sought in state affairs. Among them the *Dharmadi Guru* (chief priest) became the *Raj-pandit* of king.
6. Their ruling family came under the influence of the Hindus, they tried to develop an administrative structure in the pattern of Hindu monarchical system with patrilineal and matrilineal both.

A new Hinduised tribal monarchical system of administration came into existence. The designation *pha* was substituted by the Hindu term *Raja* i.e. king and the territory came to be known *Desha* or *Rajya* (Hedamba Desha or Rajya). Under the new system, the full authority was given to the Raja as white umbrella as it had been with the neighboring chief of Manipur, Jayantia, Tripura etc. Divinity was attached to kingship under Hindu pattern and the person of the king came to be considered sacrosanct like other Hinduised tribal chiefs. The king also formed a court by developing a Hinduised aristocracy around him, distinguished by the title of Burman, who had control over their subjects *Dan* or

Parvattiyas (descendants of the original Kachari race). This was the structure of administration when the Kachari capital was shifted to Maibong. The right of succession was hereditary only to the male line, most probably with regard to the law of primogeniture. But in the absence of a legal claimant, the throne was offered to the king's brother or his nearest relatives. As a successor to the king, *Deka Raja* or *Yubaraja* (crown prince or heir elect) was next to the king in power and dignity. He was the Commander-in-Chief of the armies. He had to take on the field personally when necessary. He sent his administrators to the distant areas. Next to them, there were four Rajputras, not necessarily princes of the royal blood, who enjoyed high judicial authority but were empowered to award any punishment short of death. Below the Rajputras, *Mantis* (Ministers). They were called *Bhandaris* and *Patras*. The chief of the Council of Ministers was called *Barbhandari*. It is said that originally there were eighteen ministers with limited power and authority. The administrative system of the Kachari formed from the tribal polity to a Hinduised monarchical system, where the despotic authority given to the ruler seemed to be limited. His Council of Ministers popularly called *Mel* gave him advice in important matters.

The King also did not interfere in the royal affairs of the clans and the villagers who enjoyed considerable authority in their own administration under the headman helped by a village council. The Kachari kings were the sovereign rulers of their state, as they claimed themselves as different titles. Several *Sri* were used before the name of the Raja, which suffixed by *Maharajadhiraj*, *Rajendra*, *Nripakulachuramani* etc. The functional authority was vested in a large number of *Bhandari* and *Patra*, who were drawn both from the Dimasa and the Bengali subjects. Their administration was more or less, similar to that of the neighbouring tribal Hinduised states. It appeared with a flaming zeal for territorial aggrandizement, and the latter as agricultural settlers in search of land. In 1531, the Ahom king Suhungmung sent some officers to construct a fort at Morangi, a border village between the two states. The Kachari king took it to be an invasion from this fort. In order to punish the Kachari, the Ahom king proceeded up to Dhansiri with a large army and halted at the meeting point of the Doiyang near Dhansiri River. A night attack was made on a place called Nika, which was plundered and burnt. The Ahom then proceeded to Dingput, where the army was divided into two. On ascending both the banks of the Dhansiri, the Kachari defeated and pursued to their Capital Dimapur. The Kachari king fled with his son. A powerful Ahom force arrived at Marangi. From Marangi they proceeded further to meet Kachari, at Hamdai.

The kings of Heramba kingdom (Cachar), are said to have ruled over different principalities in the Brahmaputra Valley in early times. The *Cacharer Itivritta* gives some details about their kingdom attained a state of civilization and culture to increase far superior to that of the Ahoms and other mountainous neighbours. Hence, they merged with Khaspur state, and the population in these states also increased over the year in the same process as in the traditional guilds. The archaeological remains and relics of the palatial buildings, gateways, pillars and temples during the Kachari rule still bear testimony to their attainments in sculpture, architecture and engineering skill. The Kachari kings were also patrons of literature. Some of them even proved themselves to be good scholars. After acceptance of Hinduism, their royal court was adorned by a galaxy of Brahmans, who translated some of the Puranas and a few portion of the Hindu epics to popular idioms, particularly Bengali. The Brahmans were donated *Niskar* lands. The original Kachari literature consisted of a vast amount of oral literature including folk tales, ballads and proverbs. In the Cachar plains, the pre-Dimasa *khel* system continued to be the institution of local administration. Each *khel* (an area under common ownership of the inhabitants) had a *Mukhtar* as its head.

The political structure as it was a monarchy. The king was the head, assisted by the *Sengphongs*, ministers or *Patras*, *Jonthais* as priest, military officers or Senapati, the Khunang, Uzir etc. It is presumed that like other contemporary powers, the Dimasa-Kachari maintained a strong military organization. All the able bodied males were enlisted in the army and the main column was known as *Chandi Paltan*. Different historical data mentions that they fought several battles with their enemies. However, these elements entered into the political systems when they adopted the terms and a function of the officials is difficult to ascertain. From the study of their history it is found that by the 16th century AD, there was much influence of Brahmanical Hinduism in the socio-political domain of the Dimasas. Their king maintained peaceful diplomatic relations with the neighbouring kings. They also preferred the artisans like Kumar, Tanti, Yogi, Sutradhar etc. The vaisya community maintained boat-bound trade with Bengal, while merchant from China, Burma and Bengal visited the local markets. Finally, due to shifting his capital to Maibong the original political process was dissimilated and the systems reached a crucial phase.

CONCLUSION:

From the over and above the social and polity formation of the Kachari state can be found from the Ahom records. Sukapha confronted with the Kachari and defeated them in the battle and forced them to leave the land. In order to strengthen the defensive power they crossed the river Dikhow and joined their brethren. They were scattered in various parts of the region and the traditional authority structure was very highly segmented. However, they were able to form their political apparatus with the southern Kachari after the movement. The system of an administration of the Kachari seems to have evolved through gradual process from tribal polity to a Hinduised monarchy. Generally each tribe had its

own administrative organization where their chiefs were all in all. The chief of the Kachari was called *pha*. The primary duties of the *pha* were to look after the state, make sacrifices to the Gods, conquer other tribes etc. The ministers who called *Patra-Montri* helped him in his administration. However, divinity was tried to be attached to their chieftain-ship. The Dimasa-Kachari kingdom of Cachar was regarded by the scattered Bodos of the region as the 'lingering symbol of their royal unity and hence they maintained some sort of loyalty to its rulers, paying tributes to them from whenever they lived'. Therefore the Dimasa or Parbatiyas, who are still preserving their own culture intact, may be considered as the representatives of the original Kachari race. In course of time, they came slowly under the influence of Hinduism, so that by the 17th century AD they had succumbed to it. But in case of them, Hinduisation was limited to the members of the ruling class only.

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